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"NIGHTS IN NO MAN'S LAND"

OF all the books which have come out of the war none bears a stamp of greater sincerity, of transparency, than "*Over There*,"¹ by Captain R. Hugh Knyvett, an intelligence officer with the Australian infantry. Whether or not the author has had any previous apprenticeship in literature we are not informed, and the book contains no reference on its title-page or otherwise to any other work by the same writer, nevertheless "*Over There*" is an example of that apparent simplicity and artlessness which is generally the result of long practice and marked talent.

The book takes the reader back to the early days of recruiting in Australia, and follows the fortunes of the Anzacs through Egypt, Gallipoli, Flanders and France. The story of the way in which the men of Never Never Land, the residents of the "outback" settlements of Australia, went to war is epic in its sweep, and harks back to the tales of Homeric heroes. The chapter is entitled "Human Snowballs," and tells how little bands of volunteers gathered recruits as they marched on their way to enlist.

The story reads:

When the war broke out the problem of the government was how to collect the volunteers from these outback towns for active service. It would cost from fifty to one hundred dollars per head in railway fare to bring them into camp.

The outbacker, however, solved the problem without waiting for the government to make up its mind. They just made up their swags and "humped the bluey"² for the coast. That is how

the remarkable phenomenon of the human snow-ball marches commenced.

Simultaneously from inland towns in different parts of Australia men without the means of paying their transportation to Sydney or Melbourne simply started out to walk the three or four hundred miles from their homes to the nearest camp. In the beginning there would just be half a dozen or so, but as they reached the next township they would tell where they were bound, and more would join. Passing by boundary riders' and prospectors' huts, they would pick up here and there another red-blood who could not resist the chance of being in a real ding-dong fight. Many were grizzled and gray, but as hard as nails, and no one could *prove* that they were over the age for enlistment, for they themselves did not know how old they were!

"Said the squatter, 'Mike, you're crazy, they have soldier-men a-plenty!

You're as grizzled as a badger, and you're sixty year or so!' 'But I haven't missed a scrap,' says I, 'since I was one-and-twenty,

And shall I miss the biggest? You can bet your whiskers —No!!'"

—Robert W. Service.

Presently the telegraph-wires got busy, and the defense department in Melbourne rubbed its eyes and sat up. As usual, the country was bigger than its rulers, and more men were coming in than could be coped with. The whole country was a catchment of patriotism—a huge river-basin—and these marching bands from the far-out country were the tributaries which fed the huge river of men which flowed from the State capitals to the concentration camps in Sydney and Melbourne. The leading newspapers soon were full of the story of these men from the bush who could not wait for the government to gather them in, and none should deny them the right to fight for their liberties.

Strange men these, as they tramped into a bush township, feet tied up in sacking, old felt hats on their heads, moleskins and shirt, "bluey," or blue blanket, and "billy," or quart canister, for boiling tea slung over their backs, all white from the dust of the road

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Only the eye of God Almighty could see that beneath the dust and rags there were hearts beating with love for country, and spirits exulting in the opportunity offering in the undertaking of a

¹"*Over There*" *With the Australians*. By Captain R. Hugh Knyvett, Anzac Scout, Intelligence Officer 15th. Australian Infantry. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1918.

²*Humped the bluey*—tramped across country with blue blanket (or swag).

man-size job. Perhaps a Kitchener would have seen that the slouch was but habit and the non-chalance merely a cloak for enthusiasm, but even he would hardly have guessed that these were the men who would win on Gallipoli the praise of the greatest British generals, who called them "the greatest fighters in the world." Soon the news of these bands "on the wallaby" at the call of country caught the imagination of the whole nation. Outback was terra incognita to the city-bred Australian, but that these men who were coming to offer their lives should walk into the city barefoot could not be thought of. The government was soon convinced that the weeks, and, in some cases, months that would be occupied in this long tramp need not be wasted. Military training could be given on the way, and they might arrive in camp finished soldiers.

The temper of the author and of the Australians generally is shown by the passages referring to the Gallipoli campaign, in which we are told that the Anzacs did not feel resentful on account of the enormous sacrifices which they were compelled to make, but realised that blunders were inevitable and that they might as well be the ones affected as any others; although some of the English divisions shared the same devastation and were equally heroic. Besides, the writer reminds us, the demonstration held up a million Turkish soldiers from attacking Russia, thereby releasing at least that many Russians for service against the Teutons.

Captain Knyvett was a scout and his duties took him constantly into No Man's Land for the purpose of obtaining information as to the enemy numbers and dispositions. His account of the exploits in the chapter headed, "Nights in No Man's Land," is a series of tales complete in themselves.

The first night "out there." The memory of it still quickens the pulse and makes the cheek grow pale. How my teeth chattered, my heart beat almost to suffocation, every splash of a rat was an enemy scout, and every blade of grass magnified itself into a post for their barbed wire. I had but gone a few yards when I expected the next instant to bump into the enemy trenches.

There are strange sounds in No Man's Land; not human sounds, for such carry far—the beat of a hammer on a post, the sharp twang of unrolling barbed wire as it catches, and then springs away—voices even come as through a megaphone in the eerie silence—but these are long-drawn sighs that penetrate the inner consciousness and hushed murmurs that fall on the ear of the soul. I have felt a touch on the shoulder as though one would speak to me when there has been no one by.

It is the grave of ten thousand unburied dead, but the grinning skulls and quivering jelly or the few rags that flutter in the wind are not the comrades that we knew. I think their spirits hover near, for they cannot go to their abiding-place till victory has been won. They are ever seeking to pierce the veil of sense so that they may add their strength to our arms, and these make for us of No Man's Land "no strange place," and give to our sentries encouragement until the land of No Man vanishes and our possession reaches to the barrier of the enemy barbed wire. My nights in No Man's Land if added together would total many months, and I grew to feel that it was one of the safest places on the whole front.

With a small party of scouts Knyvett starts out one night to seek identification of the opposing regiments, and to bring back at least one Hun alive. After telling how "It was too dark to pick a path and we committed no sacrilege as we trod on the bodies of forgotten comrades. It was impossible to repress a shudder as the hand met the clammy flesh, and the spilt light from a rocket exposed the marble eyeballs and whitened flesh of the cheek with the bared teeth gleaming yet more white," he continues:

We waited drawn-out minutes while the dark smothered us and our thoughts haunted us. Minute piled on minute while we suffered the torture of the heretic who was fastened so that the falling drops of ice-water would follow each on the self-same spot. Home and "Love of Life" sought to drag us back to the shelter of our trenches, but Duty like an iron stake pinned us there. But the stake was fast loosening in the soil of our resolution, when we heard the guttural gruntings that announced the approach of our quarry. We let them pass us and get well away from their trenches, then silently, like hunters stalking wild beasts, we followed them. When we were close enough to be almost overpowered by the smell of

sauerkraut and sausage mingling with stale sweat, my voice rapped out, though muffled by the thick air: "Hands up!" There was no hesitation in obeying, although there were eight of them and only six of us. We pointed out the direction for them to go, and reminded them with our boots that there was no time to waste. We had only crossed a couple of shell-holes, however, when we came to a full stop. Presently I understood that they had discovered we were Australians and were terrified. Probably they had been fed up with tales about our savagery, that we tortured our prisoners. Anyway, they would not budge, and we could not carry eight hulking Germans and had no means of tying them together. Presently, the disturbance attracted notice from both trenches and there was only one thing to do. My sergeant called out: "Look out, sir! We'll be seen in a minute. What will we do?" The contest was short and sharp; they outnumbered us, but we went to it with a will. It was sheer butchery, but I had rather send a thousand of the swine down to the fatherland than lose one of my boys. And perhaps it was charity to some wife and daughter who would now be free from the brutality of her Teutonic lord and master.

On another evening he had an adventure with a German officer who lost his way:

There is nothing so easy as to be lost in No Man's Land. A compass is useless, for you may be lying on a fifteen-inch shell just covered with a few inches of earth, and the stars refuse to look down on its pain, and the sky is always thickly veiled. Turn round three times, and you don't know which trench to return to. It is an awkward predicament, and many a time I went blindly forward praying that it was in the right direction. The German's horn-rimmed glasses but bewildered him the more, and we have had several of them walk into our arms without intention, though they soon found that thereby they had bettered themselves. There was one young Bavarian officer who made this miscalculation. I saw him moving near our wire in the early dawn. I called to some men to draw a bead on him, but he came toward us and at the last with a run jumped down into our trench. "Good morning!" I said to him, looking down my automatic, and you never saw such a crestfallen countenance in your life. It must have been some shock, expecting to join his own people and suddenly finding himself in the camp of his enemies. I found out afterward that he was a young cadet qualifying for his commission, and this was his

first night in the trenches. He evidently was seeking an iron cross very early in his career. I spat question after question at him: "What's your regiment?" "How long have you been in the trenches?" etc., but in English he replied: "I won't tell you anything. You can't make me!" "All right, old chap, don't get excited! Come along with me." I took him to the dugout which I shared with the medical officer in the support-trenches and sent Pat, my batman, to get together the best meal he could. Pat was a genius as a provider. None of the other officers liked him, for they suspected he was the medium for the loss of some of their luxuries, and I always had a blind eye. On this occasion Pat got together a real slap-up feed—some tinned sausages, mashed potatoes, strawberry jam, preserved pears and cream, not forgetting a bottle of champagne. I sent for the doctor and we fell to with gusto, and never offered his nibs a bite, though the eyes were popping out of his head, and his mouth watering with hunger. Toward the end of the meal I said to him: "I can't compel you to tell me anything, but I am not compelled to feed you. But you know how to earn something to eat." He began to tell me something I knew was all rubbish and I swung at him with "You swine! If you tell me those lies I'll strip your badges off you and send you in as a private." I was surprised at the effect this threat had on him, though I knew that was the one thing that never failed in bringing a German officer to book. He trembled and paled and gave me a lot of information that I afterward proved to be correct.

* * * *

Here's a good story of Pat, my old batman, who had been a shearer's cook in Australia, and looked after me like a father. He was really too old for the trenches, but this job just suited him. I was surprised one day to see him with a German prisoner. He was never in a charge, and had no business having this man. Probably he had borrowed him from some other chap. I said to him: "Pat, what on earth are you doing with Fritz?" "To tell yer the truth, sorr-r, Oi haven't yet made up my moind!" "Let us have no humbug, take him back to the cage!" "Very well, sorr-r!" About ten minutes later I saw Pat without his prisoner. "Here, Pat, what on earth did you do with Fritz?" "Well, sorr-r, he kept beggin' and beggin' to be let go, so Oi just put a Mills¹ in his pocket with the pin out, and tould him to run for his loife!" He would not get fifty yards before it went off!

¹ A bomb that explodes automatically at a set time after the "pin" is removed.—Ed.